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ABSTRACT

In 1996, New Jersey's Bergen Community College (BCC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. BCC's primary goals were: infusing material into existing American history and literature courses, creating new ethnic literature and history courses, conducting a speaker's series, establishing a discussion group, and developing in students an appreciation for ethnic diversity. The greatest obstacle confronted by BCC was having too little time. Because the project only ran from Spring 1996 to Fall 1996 (with a summer in the middle), it was difficult to establish continuity. Other obstacles included: an insufficient amount of faculty cooperation due to the numerous groups involved and competition between non-core courses for students. The groundwork has been laid for institutionalizing the project, and the college community in general has participated in the project. The literature and history faculty that have an interest in diversity continue to reinforce the issues of pluralism and identity in their courses. Student reaction to the project has been favorable. They were optimistic about the ability of the members of the college community to act as individuals and, at the same time, to work together harmoniously. (HAA)

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Bergen Community College
Exploring America's Communities:
In Quest of Common Ground

Progress Report

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 090

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Bergen
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Exploring America's Communities Project: In Search of Common Ground
Progress Report

1. Bergen Community College is a comprehensive, publicly supported two-year college which is fully accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The College opened in September, 1968. Through its open admissions policy, the college is committed to equal educational opportunities for all, regardless of race, sex, religion, age, national origin, or handicap.

Bergen Community College enrolls over 12,000 full- and part-time students of all ages in its degree and certificate programs in more than seventy fields of study, and an additional 10,000 students in its division of continuing education.

The student body reflects the diversity of the county and this diversity is celebrated on campus. In Fall 1996, there were 2,973 foreign-born students representing over 98 countries. Of the 12,296 students enrolled, 68.3 % were White, 16 % Hispanic, 9.7 % Asian, 0.2 % Native American, and 5.8 % African American. The median age of a Bergen student is 23.3. The male population represents 43 % of the total enrollment; women make up 57 % of the student body.

Bergen Community College is located on a beautiful 167-acre suburban campus and is bordered by two golf courses and a county park. The campus is in Paramus, New Jersey, the geographic center of Bergen County. With more than 300,000 households and nearly one-million residents, Bergen is one of the largest counties in the state. The college is approximately 20 minutes to the north of New York City, which affords students access to a wide variety of cultural events and activities.

2. The primary goals of the Action Plan to enhance teaching and learning about American pluralism and identity at Bergen Community College were:

- To infuse material into existing courses in American literature and American history,

- To create new courses, one in "American Ethnic Literature" and a History course in "Diversity and Unity",
- To conduct a speakers' series during the Fall 1996 semester,
- To set up a discussion group comprised of faculty in literature and history to address infusion issues as well as plans for curricular implementation,
- To address that part of the college Mission Statement which calls upon the college community "to develop in students an understanding and appreciation . . . of the diversity of our pluralistic society."

3. Upon returning to campus after the AACC conference in Washington, D.C., we set up a committee of members of the English and history faculties which met on several occasions during Spring and Fall 1996. We arranged through our Faculty Development program a speakers' series, and held three lectures at the college: on October 10 Dr. Mia Anderson of the Bergen Community College English Department spoke on "Out of the Air-Tight Cage: Re-Visioning Teaching and Learning"; on November 14, as part of his site visit, Dr. David Trask, project mentor and Professor of History at Guilford Technical Community College, spoke on "Is There a Crisis of Community in America? Why Us? Why Now?"; on December 12 Dr. Edward Countryman, Professor of History at Southern Methodist University, spoke on the subject of his new book, "Americans: A Collision of Histories."

In his American Literature I course, Dr. Alan Kaufman revised his syllabus to make it more inclusive. Much of the course was built around the questions of what divides and brings Americans together, and what do we have in common; there was considerable material in the course by early African American and Native American authors such as Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, F.E.W. Harper, Frederick Douglass, George Copway, and William Apess, and much of the work by standard authors such as Franklin, Whitman and Thoreau was selected for its involvement with such issues as abolitionism. Dr. Kaufman also prepared a bibliography of secondary materials on American pluralism and identity, distributed to members of the diversity committee and faculty members in American literature and history, and developed a new course in American Ethnic Literature, for which he is

working to get general education approval.

In the Spring 1996 semester Professor Matthew Panczyk, History, participated in a faculty-student panel entitled "A Quest for Common Ground: E Pluribus Unum." This panel drew further attention to the national conversation on Pluralism and Identity televised at Bergen Community College in October, 1995, which had initiated Bergen's participation in the "Exploring America's Communities" project.

In the Fall of 1996, Professor Panczyk infused a Pluralism and Identity component into a Contemporary Issues and Problems history course. The purpose of the module was, first, to elicit student self-description of his/her ethnic identity with a questionnaire; second, to present a brief overview of immigration and focus on the four project questions (What does it mean to be an American? What divides us? What brings us together? What do we have in common?); and third, to ascertain in a short, open-ended essay if the students became, over the course of the semester, more sensitive to the issue of American Pluralism and Identity. A brief bibliography accompanies the module. Part of the course included student attendance at the first Native-American Day Celebration at BCC in September. The data from Professor Panczyk's pilot module will be analyzed to ascertain the usefulness of this pedagogical approach. If deemed useful, the module will be piloted in the United States History survey course.

Professor Panczyk has designed a general approach to the teaching of a proposed history course entitled "Diversity and Unity." The history faculty will continue to discuss the proposed course during the Spring 1997 semester.

In addition to the brief bibliography prepared for the pilot history module, Professor Panczyk is preparing a general bibliography which will be distributed to history and other interested faculty members.

4. The greatest obstacle we confronted at Bergen Community College was the simple impediment of having too little time. Because the project ran only over one year and not over an academic year, but over Spring 1996 and then Fall 1996, with a summer stuck right in the project's middle, it was difficult

to establish continuity in our work. The Spring semester was devoted primarily to planning: to arranging the speakers' series for Fall 1996, to establishing an advisory committee, to scheduling Dr. Kaufman and Professor Panczyk in the courses that the Action Plan required them to teach. This left only the Fall 1996 semester for much of the work. Because colleagues' schedules are so busy and so varied, and because people had other commitments and the college itself schedules so many competing activities, it was difficult for our committee to meet and difficult for all interested faculty members to be present at such activities as lectures. Greater time would have enabled us to plan events earlier and might have contributed to greater participation from interested faculty members.

Another obstacle that we faced was that there are several groups at the college concerned with issues of diversity, and at times we all seemed to work without the coordination that could have enhanced all of our efforts. Again, more time might have enabled us to achieve greater coordination among these groups.

At Bergen Community College there are no required courses in either history or literature; rather all courses offered by the two programs are humanities electives, and, as such, unfortunately, we are in unavoidable competition for students. Whether or not this situation suggests a third obstacle was debated. During Fall 1996, the historians and literature professors met together in an on-going discussion group, and held fruitful discussions and shared ideas about how to infuse issues of diversity into their courses. In the course of these sometimes heated discussions, inevitable differences arose. Some faculty favored rather complete revision of course syllabi while others appeared to favor more of a modular approach to infusion. Questions arose and were discussed about whether survey courses should aim for coverage or be designed around questions (like what does it mean to be an American?). Disagreements like these, which are by no means unique to Bergen Community College, arose between members of the same discipline as well as between literature people and historians. And while such discussions are useful and can be invigorating, they could perhaps also suggest collaborative difficulties. To continue discussing these important issues and moving along in our plan to infuse issues of pluralism and identity into American-content courses, we are considering establishing a reading group for

interested members of the history and literature disciplines after the project is over; perhaps such a continuing and on-going group can contribute to further collaboration between these two intimately related humanities disciplines.

5. The groundwork has been laid for institutionalizing this project. The college community in general participated in the project, principally through discussions and attendance at lectures. During the Spring 1997 semester, the history discipline will be refining the Pluralism and Identity pilot module into a United States History II survey course. The development of a new history course, "Diversity and Unity," will continue with input from members of the History, Sociology, and Psychology disciplines. A general history bibliography will be distributed to interested faculty, and will include a section on various approaches for assessing the great variety of materials available in the BCC library. We also plan to investigate the use of oral history as an approach to the teaching of pluralism and identity in history courses.

In American literature Dr. Kaufman will be teaching a revised version of his American literature II course, to include works by such authors as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Abraham Cahan, Leslie Marmon Silko, Etheridge Knight, Aurora Levins Morales. Much of the attention in the American literature area during Spring 1997 will be devoted to gaining approval for a new course in "American Ethnic Literature." The approval process is a long and time-consuming one: first, three four-year feeder colleges have to accept the course for general education credit; next, the literature work group must agree to add the course to its offerings, after which the course must be approved by the college-wide curriculum committee. Finally, the course must be debated and approved by the Faculty Senate of the college.

As we continue our work, we look for what President Sheldon Hackney of the National Endowment for the Humanities has called a ripple effect to occur at Bergen Community College.

6. A significant number of the literature and history faculty at Bergen Community College have an interest in diversity that predates the work of the "Exploring America's Communities" project. These colleagues continue to reinforce issues of pluralism and identity in their courses. As part of the mission

of the college is to foster understanding of American pluralism and diversity, members of the administration have supported the project. President Winn has emphasized the need for all members of the BCC community to learn more about one another. In her October 1996 newsletter, she pointed out that BCC has students from over ninety-eight countries and encouraged an increased "understanding of our differences and similarities."

Student reaction to the project has been favorable. In their responses to the project's four questions, students spoke over and over of the importance of our freedom. Students were optimistic about our ability to act at individuals and, at the same time, to work together harmoniously, as they assert we did during Desert Storm. Pride in being an American came across strongly in student responses, as did an awareness that Americans are obliged to "stand up for what you believe in" and "accept others' cultures." As to what divides us, some students felt it was a lack of understanding of different groups, ethnic and racial ones in particular. Further, students felt that mutual respect, toleration, and learning about other groups will help to overcome these situations. This belief in the power of education is an encouraging one; now we must continue to function as a scholarly community should: to bring an informed awareness to the solid instincts that so many of our students have.

Team members:

- Alan Kaufman, Associate Professor, English
- Matthew Panczyk, Associate Professor, History
- Amparo Codding, Associate Professor and Program Coordinator, Foreign Languages, Project Administrator